

How Hillary Clinton Is Teaming Up With the NYPD to Push Police Militarization under the Banner of “Counter-Terrorism”

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NY Senator Chuck Schumer and Hillary Clinton are teaming up with the NYPD to request high levels of funding for a federal “counter-terror” program that is directly bankrolling the militarization of police forces nationwide. To secure the funds, they are invoking the threat of terrorism and exploiting the climate of fear and incitement that has come to define the 2016 election cycle.

At issue is the the Urban Areas Security Initiative (UASI), which was created in 2003 as a Department of Homeland Security grant program aimed at assisting “high-threat, high-density Urban Areas in efforts to build and sustain the capabilities necessary to prevent, protect against, mitigate, respond to, and recover from acts of terrorism.” From 2003 through 2015, at least \$8.9 billion from taxpayers have been distributed in the form of UASI grants.

In reality, the program funds initiatives that contribute to blatant law enforcement overreach, including a police militarization and weapons expo known as [Urban Shield](#) and the training of SWAT teams across the country. [According to](#) the War Resisters League, which contributed research to this report, UASI effectively “strengthens and unifies state repression.”

In his proposal for next year’s federal budget, President Obama requested cuts to DHS’s funding of UASI from \$600 million in fiscal year 2016 to \$330 million in 2017, [arguing](#) that counter-terror funds are sufficiently provided elsewhere. A broad coalition of human rights organizations [called](#) this move a “step in the right direction.”

The Obama administration’s call for reductions provoked a fierce backlash, with the mayor of New York, Bill de Blasio, joining with NYPD police commissioner Bill Bratton to demand high levels of funding by [casting the city](#) as a “top terror target.”

Buoyed by [support](#) from Clinton, Schumer announced in a press [statement](#) in late May that he has successfully restored the UASI funds to the proposed Homeland Security budget. Schumer declared, “UASI is the cornerstone of effective preparedness and prevention against terror attacks and in an era of rising terror threats, our support for anti-terror programs should not be falling.”

The tussle over funding comes amid mounting concerns over police impunity. At a time when Black Lives Matter protests have forced public scrutiny of police militarization and killings of African Americans, politicians and police leaders are using the supposedly

imminent threat of terror to bulk up their budgets and subvert a national conversation about the proper allocation of public resources.

“Ticking Time Bomb Mentality”

UASI grants do not exclusively fund police; they also finance first responders like firefighters when they can show that a [“nexus to terrorism exists.”](#) A FEMA spokesperson told AlterNet that the agency is unable to immediately provide a breakdown of what percentage of the recipients are law enforcement agencies.

Lara Kiswani, executive director of the Arab Resource and Organizing Center, explained in an interview with AlterNet: “If you want to fund emergency response, fund emergency response. We do not believe UASI is intended for that at all.”

Kiswani’s suspicion is understandable. A 2011 report from the National UASI Association, which describes itself as a “nonprofit composed of UASI Programs,” [notes](#) that, “From 2003 to 2010, Urban Areas spent approximately \$623 million to support terrorism prevention capabilities. Much of this funding has focused on enhancing intelligence collection, analysis and sharing with fusion centers playing a key role in the process.”

Such centers, which operate as ill-defined counter-terrorism spying and intelligence gathering hubs, have conducted warrantless surveillance on [Occupy](#) activists and [Muslim-American](#) communities. “Fusion centers have long been an issue that Congress keeps pouring money into without comprehensive oversight or accountability,” Michael German, a fellow for the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU Law School, told AlterNet. “Because their focus is on intelligence, their threat to civil liberties is enormous and the ability to check abuse is almost nonexistent.”

But it gets worse. Craig Dziedzic, general manager for the Bay Area Urban Areas Security Initiative, [noted this year](#) that the funds continue to bankroll Urban Shield, which he described as “an annual full-scale exercise, which is conducted throughout the Bay Area UASI region for 48 hours.” Urban Shield brings together international SWAT teams, weapons manufacturers and police agencies to Alameda County, Calif. for a war games and arms sales extravaganza human rights campaigners say illustrates the epitome of state violence. The event has met such stiff resistance from local residents and activists that in 2014 its weapons expo was [kicked out](#) of Oakland.

UASI is also funneling money into SWAT teams across the country, from [Macomb, Michigan](#) to [Boston, Massachusetts](#). According to a 2012 [report](#) from Sen. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.), “Keene, New Hampshire, with a population just over 23,000 and a police force of 40, set aside UASI funds to buy a BearCat armored vehicle.” Coburn pointed out that UASI funds bankrolled first responders’ \$1,000-per-person attendance at a training that included a workshop where actors dressed as zombies were gunned down “to simulate a real-life terrorism event.”

FEMA [says](#) that, in fiscal year 2016, 29 urban areas were deemed eligible for funds according to “an analysis of relative risk of terrorism.” The New York City area is by far the largest recipient of UASI funds, which [finance](#) the NYPD’s 500-officer Critical Response Command, a permanent counter-terror unit whose cars are “fitted to hold Colt M4 semiautomatic assault rifles,” [according to](#) New York Times reporter David Goodman.

UASI is helping expand and arm “counter-terror” policing in a city whose top police officer, Bratton, used public fear over terrorism in the wake of the Paris, Brussels and San Bernardino attacks to press for the expansion of police powers, [including](#) access to phone data. Some complain that his department has treated Black Lives Matter protesters like a [terrorist threat](#). According to Josmar Trujillo, a writer and organizer with New Yorkers Against Bratton, “They are using this ticking time bomb mentality, where the mysterious threat of terrorism is always there and at any moment we could all die, so you have to rush to make decisions and bypass civil rights and human rights.”

AlterNet reached out to DHS but was unable to locate an official willing to speak on the record. The NYPD did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

“Nexus to Terror”

What is the system-wide impact of financially incentivizing disaster response rooted in counter-terror measures, in a country that has been fighting a nebulous war on terror for nearly 15 years?

In a letter to U.S. senators, 35 grassroots groups, including the American Friends Service Committee, Malcolm X Grassroots Movement and Center for Constitutional Rights, [argued](#) that “by requiring training supported by these federal funds to contain a ‘nexus to terrorism,’ UASI serves to fuel the dangerous culture of aggression so rampant in U.S. police departments. UASI also creates a structural bond between militarized law enforcement and vital emergency response resources and workers.”

Notably, the congressional fight over UASI funding comes at a time when social movements are demanding accountability for police violence and racism and calling for alternatives to mass incarceration. Even Clinton claims to be disavowing her [track record](#) of supporting “tough on crime” and “war on drugs” policies, yet she is invoking the threat of terror to back high levels of UASI funding. “We need it, we need it, I want it,” Clinton said of UASI funding in an [April interview](#) with reporters for the New York Daily News. “I don’t agree with the Obama administration on that.”

Kiswani claimed that “politicians are exploiting the climate of fear of Muslims and racism against Arabs in order to further programs like UASI so that they can use them to further exploit other communities of color. I think the war on terror has consistently been used to further the already-existing oppressive structures in the United States. This is no different than the way that the war on drugs has been used.”

Data shows that there is already tremendous overlap between the war on terror and the war on drugs. Of the wiretaps granted by state and federal courts in 2013, [nearly 90 percent](#) were used for drug investigations, with drug wiretaps almost tripling between 2003 and 2013.

UASI is just one piece of a much larger patchwork of federal initiatives that militarize police departments, including the [1033 program](#), which allows the Department of Defense to transfer weapons of war to state and local law enforcement agencies.

“Time after time we’ve seen how programs like UASI feed on cultures of fear to further militarization around the country and the world,” Tara Tabassi, national organizer for the War Resisters League, told AlterNet. “But we’ve also learned how being SWAT raided or

teargassed by law enforcement, compels us to build movements across communities—working together to build a demilitarized world.”

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